

NOTE

THE POLITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE SETTLEMENT CONTROVERSY OF 1656-60: AN INITIAL COMPUTER STUDY

THE SHORT PERIOD between the collapse of the republican Commonwealth and the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy was one of the most traumatic in a century of constitutional and religious crises in Britain. This is reflected in the pattern of political printing. The years 1640-42, 1649-50 and 1688-89 were all marked by extraordinary printing energy, but none more so than 1659-60.

The following account of a preliminary computer study of the bibliographical details of the politico-religious literature of 1659-60 is itself just the initial stage of a long-term project devoted to an analysis of the structure of political argument for that crucial year.¹ The first step was to abstract from the *Wing Short Title Catalogue* the full range of politico-religious literature. For the vast majority of cases, the short titles themselves are sufficiently informative. Where they are not, knowledge of the author, printer, bookseller, or of whether the item was collected by Thomason, have provided additional means of identifying relevant material. When in doubt, however, the policy has been to include initially and weed out later. At this stage, it is not expected that the weeding will be statistically significant. The result has been to suggest that this somewhat neglected period of political literary activity was in fact the most productive year of the seventeenth century, amounting to as many as 3,500 items, comprising treatises, tracts, proclamations, broadsides, letters, poems, histories and sermons. It was the sheer size and scope of the literature that also seemed to necessitate its being put on a computer in order to see just what correlations arose from the bibliographic detail. Without a computer, an historian could spend years without ever seeing all the patterns of printing distribution and authorship, or spend as long in chasing an abortive hypothesis. In this way, one can begin to see just why the very bulk of the literature may have been a factor in its relative neglect.²

The computer study then, has assumed considerable significance within the context of the posited study as a whole and has itself been broken down into three stages. The first has been to build a file of 60 records by randomly selecting three batches of 20 *Wing* entries each, in order to define record structure, to check potential usefulness of indexes and to generate hypotheses.

The second stage will be to build a file of some 10% of the putative whole (350 items), also randomly selected. After rechecking and adjusting in the light of the results thrown up by this, the third stage will be to key in the complete literature. It was thought necessary to proceed in this slow and crab-like manner as there is no suitable model to follow and because each stage could potentially generate new hypotheses to be tested. The remainder of this note is an account of the first stage, offered in the hope that it may itself produce constructive suggestions which can be incorporated into the further stages of the bibliographical

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enterprise.

The University of Northwestern Illinois' Remote Information Query System was chosen for a variety of reasons. First, as it is a public program on the University of New South Wales Cyber mainframe, it was there: and using it was simply a matter of having a user number. Secondly, one of us had sufficient expertise with the program to be able to design a file for the input without needing to consult with anyone, which saved an enormous amount of time and money. Thirdly, that — should we have run into trouble — expertise was available in the Library School, which uses the *RIQS* program for teaching purposes. Apart from these pragmatic reasons, however, *RIQS* is in fact a very good package for what we wanted to do, as it is especially suited to handling bibliographic material and cross-correlating it in indexes using multiple access points. The fact that these indexes have to be run as batch jobs was an additional advantage since it meant that two otherwise busy people did not have to spend a long time interacting with a terminal in order to produce the relevant data: a period of time editing the file and a submit command produces a hard copy version which can be studied at leisure for its possibly important results. At the same time, since *RIQS* has an on-line search capacity, it is possible to pull out a particular set of records without running the whole file through the index process. This has not proved of use yet, but the ability to search may well be important in the second stage when the test file of 350 records has been built. The number of hits produced by a search could well provide a guide to which correlations are going to produce interesting index results — either because there are so many of them or so few. When the full file of 3,500 has been built, searching will probably be the most useful and economical form of access.

In structuring the file for the input of data we asked ourselves what is possible and what is potentially useful. Initially the decision was to use seven fields: author; short title (as in Wing); date of publication; place of publication; imprint details — by whom published and for whom; format; and whether or not the item appeared in the Thomason tract collection. It was originally decided to use *RIQS* ranging capacity and to define the date filed as 'date' but the experience of the test run has shown that in fact we sacrifice considerable flexibility by so doing. The range is very small — and the ability to add other data such as '2nd edition', 'previous ed. 1649', 'republished 1701', etc., would be very useful. In the full sample therefore the date field will be redefined as alphanumeric and multiple: which will allow us to run various permutations on the date field and pull up all those items which are questionable, are second editions or have subsequent printings.

Further wisdom gained from the test run shows that the author field should also be multiple. Some items are by titled authors or self-proclaimed gentry, or self-confessed sectaries: to be able to retrieve both, e.g. Andrewes and Bishop, or Monck and Albermarle, or William Simpson and 'A Quaker', could be useful. Moreover, the Commissioners for Scotland had obviously to be found under both Scotland and Commissioners. Early indexes also taught us the need to distinguish

between London as a specified and as an assumed place of publication, lacking other data. London assumed now wears a question mark — due to the very rare occurrence of specified places. Two other modifications have been made as a result of the test run of 60 records: a record number has been allocated, and a separate field assigned for this information. This is because we wanted to know in which batch of 20 the cards had been pulled — the field gives the batch number, the card number and the initials of the person responsible for the input — useful for solving disputes. However, since the decision was made that an invert index on the title field should be run as a matter of course — partly to isolate any significant rhetorical structure in titling and partly to indicate a possibly useful range of index terms for a later controlled indexing vocabulary, a record number was obviously essential to identify this data.

The second modification was to invert the Wing Short Title: *RIQS* author index allows us to index the title field as a whole, but a very cumbersome (and frequently augmented) list of stop words would be required to ensure that the subsequent data was not fouled up with insignificant words. It is easy to modify the title as it is keyed in, in order to bring the first significant word into the initial position in the title field. The changes, however, do not have to be consistent in format since the field is retrieved as a whole, and this means that we can determine significance by contextual criteria which would not be possible when using stop words.

Finally, the results of the test run have confirmed the old adage — that garbage in does indeed mean garbage out, and that the better the quality of the input the better the results. It is worth while spending time and thought on the initial stages, especially as Wing is not consistent and modifications have had to be made to the Wing entry to achieve the uniformity required for computer input.

Certain hypotheses have already been suggested by the first phase of computerised study, most notably this: It has long been recognised that towards the end of his life, Thomason's assiduous collecting activities diminished, and that the invaluable Thomason collection — so heavily relied upon by historians of the English Revolution — is far less useful for the period 1658-60. However, it now appears strongly that Thomason was not collecting representatively towards the end of his life (if he ever did). He seems virtually to ignore Quaker material, and this itself is emerging as one of the most cohesive and polemically noisy of the inputs into the period 1659-60. Other hypotheses can best be put in question form. How clearly can one delineate groups through the bibliographical information; is there a correlation between party affiliation and printing format? How large a part did the nobility play in printing and writing; does the very large 'anonymous' input fall into significant patterns? Can such putative patterns minimise anonymous authorship? What are the relative frequencies of the different formats? How important were provincial places of publication and are these correlated with printing format? Is there a coherent structure of key words to be found in short titles?

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NOTES

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² The political literatures generated by the execution of Charles I and the establishment of the Commonwealth and later that following the hurried departure of James II are both not only less extensive, but also more coherent being directed largely to a single issue. Both have been studied most effectively without the aid of a computer. See, e.g., John M. Wallace, 'The Engagement Controversy, 1649-52' in *The Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 68 (1964) pp.384-405; Mark Goldie, 'The Revolution of 1689 and the Structure of Political Argument' in *The Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 83 (1980), pp.473-564.

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